

California's Empire Mine

TEXT BY WALLACE STEGNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN VAUGHAN



THE ROAD UP from Grass Valley and the Mother Lode Highway curves through a dense forest of young pines, all of which have to have grown up since 1886, for by that date the mines had stripped these mountains bare, cutting fuel for their steam boilers, and had had to turn to the Pelton water wheel and eventually to electricity for their power. Houses show here and there among the trees, then at the top of Ophir Hill the woods fall back, the sky widens, a stone wall appears on the right, there are glimpses of roofs. A sign says Empire Mine State Historic Park. Inside, the walled grounds enclose nearly one hundred and fifty years of history.

The leavings of a dead mine are usually pretty un-toothsome: tailings piles, sagging corrugated-iron buildings, collapsing headframes, tangles of rusted cable, discarded machinery—the stigmata of hasty exploitation carelessly abandoned. This is different. These grounds are a well-groomed park, these buildings are maintained, and some of them, at least, were not merely built but designed.

The state park system, which bought the surface rights in 1975, is responsible for the well-kept look, but the design and order are consequences of the mine's long life. The Empire was no hit-and-run raid like the early placers, where one man could mine with no more equipment than a shovel and a pan or rocker, and where the action ended when the gravels were worked over. It took many men and much capital and machinery to get gold out of a quartz mine, but the action might last for generations.

Along with neighbor mines like the North Star and the Idaho-Maryland, the Empire revolutionized gold mining in California, and it was fabulously productive. From October 1850, when George Roberts found flake gold where the parking lot now is, to 1957, when the owners sealed off the lower levels and shut down the pumps, it extracted six million ounces of gold, more than two billion dollars' worth at modern prices. Not that it ever got such prices. When the mine closed in 1957 there was still plenty of gold down there, but the fixed price was thirty-four dollars an ounce, and it cost forty-five dollars to mine it. The experts say that gold would have to go to a thousand dollars an ounce before it would pay to reopen the work-

Gold mine owner William Bourn, Jr.'s Empire Cottage, inspired by English manors and designed by prominent San Francisco architect Willis Polk, was built in Grass Valley, California, in 1897 with waste granite from the Empire Mine.



By driving mine shafts deeper, Bourn revived the failing mine and his fortunes. He and his wife, Agnes, later had Polk design Filoli, a 43-room mansion near San Francisco. ABOVE: Arts and Crafts-style chairs and table were made for the cottage's dining room.

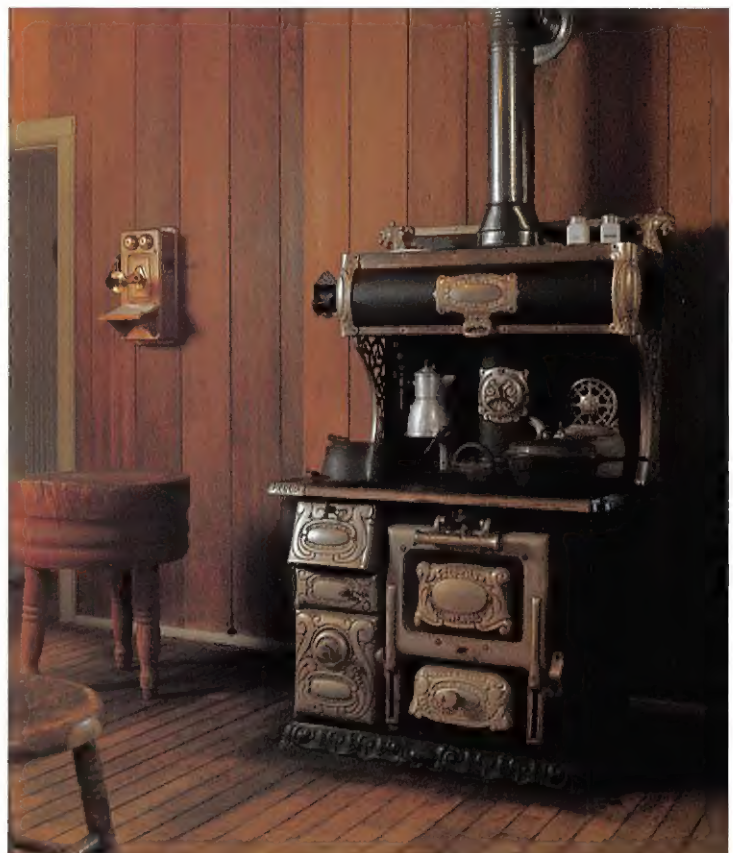
BELOW: Heart redwood covers the walls and ceilings throughout the four-bedroom, two-bath house, which Bourn visited only a few weeks a year. Servants' quarters were above the kitchen, which has its original wood-burning stove and a redwood chopping table.

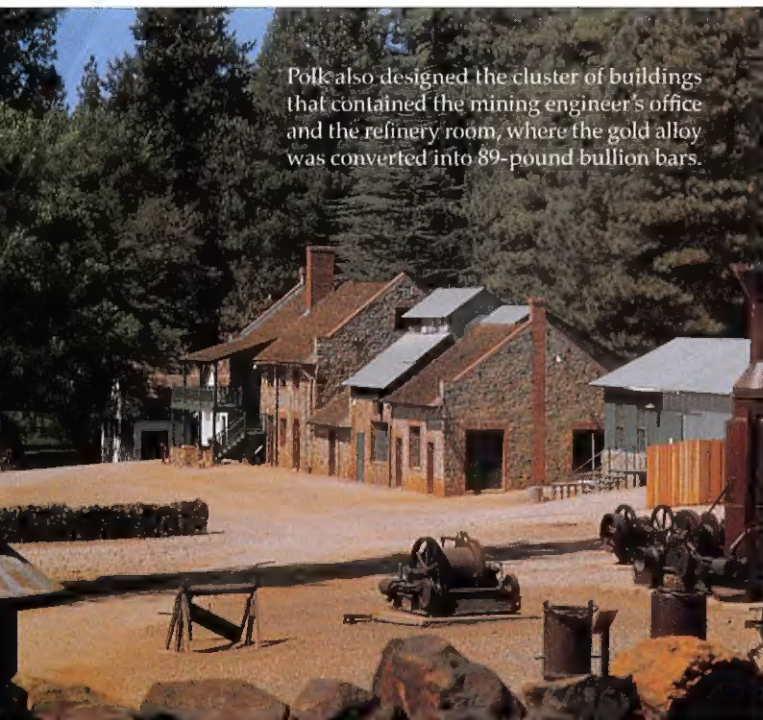
ings, which are now flooded to the hundred-and-fifty-foot level.

The Empire's buildings are ranged on the two long sides of a rectangular yard. The stamp mill, praise God, is dismantled. The imagination winces at the thought of eighty 1,750-pound stamps, each coming down every thirty seconds, crushing ore into sand. One wonders how people could stand to work within a mile of it, much less in the same building.

The old mine portal, next to the headframe and hoist house and the great wheel that once moved man-skip and ore cars up and down the shaft, stirs the imagination in a different way. Visitors peering down the converging double tracks to where they vanish in darkness can see only a few hundred feet, but they are looking almost a mile into the earth down that slanting shaft. Off it, as the wire model in the visitors' center demonstrates, go hundreds of drifts and tunnels, at every level and in every direction. There are 367 miles of them according to the literature, more than 500 according to the docent who takes parties around. If they were laid end to end, and you had gills instead of lungs, you could swim to San Diego through them.

Visitors walk around on a web of holes; some stamp experimentally, as if expecting the ground to shake. It doesn't. The hill is solid granite, and the





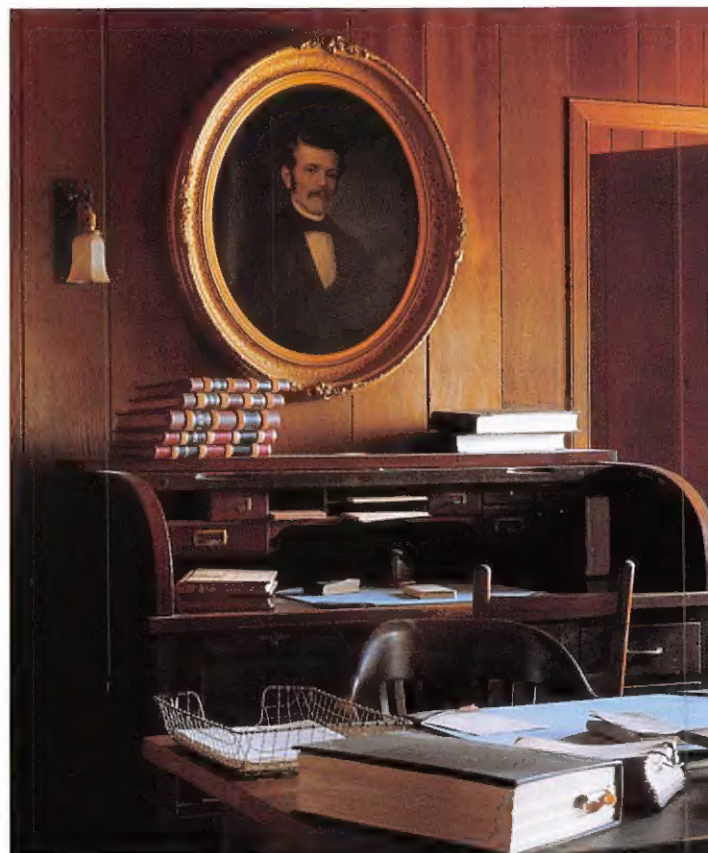
Polk also designed the cluster of buildings that contained the mining engineer's office and the refinery room, where the gold alloy was converted into 89-pound bullion bars.



Bourn's cousin George Starr became mine manager in six years, after starting at the lowly mining job of mucker. BELOW: His office includes fire sprinklers and a safe.

ABOVE RIGHT: A photo in the mine office shows the North Star Mine central shaft. Time sheets were done on the typewriter. Managers wore the clothing in the mines.

BELOW: The portrait in George Starr's office is thought to be of his father. Starr, credited with much of the Empire's success, also worked in mines in South Africa.



The entrance to the main shaft leads to 367 miles of tunnels, mostly dug by Cornish immigrants who were skilled in hard-rock mining. Some tunnels angled down for almost a mile.





holes are full of water. Neither granite nor water compresses well.

When the gold-bearing outcrops were discovered in Grass Valley, there was no one with the experience or capital to exploit them successfully. George Roberts sold his claim for three hundred and fifty dollars. Before long, hard-rock experience came from Cornwall, where deep copper and lead mines had been worked for a thousand years. By 1890 the population of Grass Valley was 85 percent Cornishmen, called Cousin Jacks because of their clannishness and their endless ability to produce a relative to fill any job vacancy. They brought with them not only hard-rock skills but the Cornish pump, without which the deep levels could not have been opened or worked. The pump shaft of the Empire eventually grew to be a mile long, with pumps working off it at many levels. Generation after generation, the Cor-



ABOVE: Circa 1880s ore cars hauled the granite containing gold to the surface, where it was crushed into sand. The gold was then combined with mercury, melted and cast into ingots.

nishmen lived their pale, dangerous, underground life, bonding only with each other, with the mules that shared their labor and with the pumps, which they habitually and affectionately referred to as " 'e."

They made Grass Valley not another camp of transients but a stable community, a town where people lived as families, and children were born and went to school, and where people of a nonmineralized lifestyle kept cropping up. Lola Montez, the flamboyant dancer, mistress to half the celebrities of Europe (among them King Ludwig of Bavaria, who made her countess of Landsfeld), spent two years

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A Low Profile for Montana

*An Innovative Sod-Roofed Ranch near
Dillon Signals a New Pioneer Spirit*

ARCHITECTURE BY EDMUND STEVENS, JR., AIA
TEXT BY VERLYN KLINKENBORG PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT RECK

"I was inspired by pioneer sod-roofed houses," says architect Edmund Stevens, Jr., who designed Gund-Ream Ranch near Dillon, Montana, for the families of George Gund III and Miller Ream. ABOVE: "We wanted the house to be private and able to blend into the countryside," says Ream.

BELOW: "We partially buried the entrance side and roofed it over with prairie sod," notes Stevens. "The shapes are soft and molded to echo the contours of the surrounding foothills. Retaining walls made of planters hold back the earth. When the junipers mature and cover them, they'll be living green walls."



there in the 1850s with a private menagerie, which included a bear. Josiah Royce, one of America's few great native-born philosophers, spent his first ten years there. Lotta Crabtree, a notable child star and melodramatic actress, grew up there. Mary Hallock Foote, a respected writer and one of the best-known illustrators of her time, spent her last forty years there as wife of the superintendent of the North Star.

But it was the Cousin Jacks who gave the mines their know-how and Grass Valley its flavor. Even today you can't walk a block in the town without passing a place that offers Cornish pasties and saffron buns.

The Empire seemed to be running out when in 1879 Cambridge-educated William Bowers Bourn, Jr., took it over from his father's estate. Bourn was then twenty-two. In time he was to become one of San Francisco's notable tycoons and philanthropists. President of the San Francisco Gas Company, president of the Spring Valley Water Company, president of the San Francisco Musical Association, member of the Pacific Union Club, trustee of Stanford University, a principal promoter of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, financial backer of the Lafayette Escadrille that went to fly and fight for France before America's entry into World War I, he was both money-maker and civilization builder. With the help of his cousin, mining engineer George Starr, and his friend and hunting companion, architect Willis Polk, he made the Empire one of the world's great mines and a showplace.

In 1898 he persuaded Starr to leave his South African job and return to the Empire, where he had grown up. Starr deepened the workings and remodeled and enlarged the surface installations, enlisting for this latter job Polk, who was already building a summer cottage for Bourn on the mine grounds. Polk built the mine office, engineer's office and other buildings on the north side of the compound in the same style and of

the same materials as the cottage, and later designed a clubhouse for the Empire Club in the lower park.

At first glance, Empire Cottage looks like no cottage at all, but a manor house. Its massive granite walls—waste rock from the mine—with their crusty brick trim make it seem bigger than its 4,000-plus square feet. Splendidly sited on a knoll, set among its formal gardens and surrounded by open park, it struck the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1897 as "unparalleled in California."

Certainly it was innovative. Polk was a sometimes inspired eclectic who had earlier, in the Bay Area, experimented with combining formal design with a calculated rusticity, the classic with the California colloquial. In Empire Cottage the mixture is more exuberant: A stone Cotswold cottage acquires a peaked portico and both peaked and lidded dormers. Windows, the entrance and dormers are framed in irregularly laid brick. To the modern eye it looks busy. Nevertheless the cottage sits with authoritative serenity on its knoll. Its gardens, designed to be part of the whole en-

The Empire was no hit-and-run raid like the early placers.

semble, drop down on the entrance side along a stepped cascade to a reflecting pool, and on the east down a vine-shaded walk between the rose garden and the kitchen garden, both enclosed by manicured holly hedges.

Inside, the cottage is smaller and simpler. Living room, dining room and reading room, the last remade into a bedroom for William Bourn after he was confined to a wheelchair by a stroke, are modest and unadorned. The light is dim, filtered through leaded-glass panes, and there is no modern effort to bring the outside in.

This is an inward-looking house on a most outward-looking site, but it has distinction. The vertical wide boards of heart redwood that form the walls were left entirely unfinished, but so satiny was the planing of some carpenter genius that they pick up every gleam of light and reflect it back as if they glowed from within.

The Bourns spent only a few weeks every summer in the cottage (that thundering stamp mill just two hundred and fifty yards away?). In 1915 Polk designed for them a forty-three-room mansion on six hundred acres in Woodside, south of San Francisco. They named it Filoli—fight, love, live. Now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, it draws many more visitors than its humbler relative on Ophir Hill.

Bourn sold out to the Newmont Mining Corporation in 1929. Polk, a vehement and contentious man, had quarreled with Bourn during the building of Filoli and had parted from his principal patron. But what they did together, a capitalist, an engineer and an architect, has durability. If civilization is a pyramid to which each man brings a stone, they can be said to have had a part in the making of a California civilization. They took the veins of gold-bearing quartz that thread the granite of Ophir Hill and turned them into money and power and art, and it is appropriate that their monuments should survive them.

As for the nameless Cousin Jacks who did the hard and dangerous work, they have another sort of monument: the town of Grass Valley. It is not so picturesque as Nevada City or Murphys or Volcano or Columbia or other Mother Lode museum towns. It never had time to become a museum, it was too busy living. It changed with the times, and seems now on the road to becoming a bedroom for Sacramento. But it is itself, its own monument; and what it is came, just as surely as the Empire Mine State Historic Park, or Empire Cottage, or Filoli, out of the difficult granite of Ophir Hill. □

JAMES HAVARD

The Painter's Santa Fe Residence
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sion. The wood of the blanket chests, chimney cabinet and corner cupboards scattered around seems to have been galvanized with age. Old stone mortars stand in corners indoors and in the gardens, holding flowers Havard has dried himself.

The unifying elements in the house are the native American artifacts that are found throughout. Hopi masks stare down from the tops of cupboards, and kachinas watch from the shelves. A belled leather dance kilt hangs on the wall leading to the studio, and moccasins rest on shelves and tables. In a guest bedroom, a turquoise-painted Mexican corner cupboard filled with beaded moccasins is flanked by a Navajo silver bridle and a Plains calumet adorned with feathers. A couple of old Apache Winchester rifles lean against the fireplace in the master bedroom. There, one finds a visual sequence that is repeated again and again in the outer rooms: a beaded leather tunic, a pot of dried flowers, a Shaker cupboard and a painting by Havard—the four points of his compass.

But there is a fifth compass point: the artist's seven-year-old son, Houston, who spends part of each year in Santa Fe. There are pictures of him everywhere, brandishing a badminton racket, wearing a cowboy hat, dressed for karate. In his studio, Havard keeps an immense photograph of his son at two on a beach. Houston's own room is a boy's paradise, hung with old game boards, a Plains shield and a bow and quiver. But Houston's presence runs deeper than this. "He paints and draws all the time," says Havard. "He goes into the studio with me. I've been using some of his drawings, collaging 'em right into the paintings. I can't do 'em as well." In one of the baths, alongside two of Havard's monotypes, is a little painting titled *Ninja* done by Houston in colors that perfectly suit the house's muted tones. "I had this old frame with a silk mat," says Havard. "I put that ninja in there—it looks just like a Twombly." □

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